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Children's Perceptions of Deviance and Disorder

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COIE, JOHN D., and PENNINGTON, BRUCE F. *Children's Perceptions of Deviance and Disorder.* CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1976, 47, 407–413. First-, fourth-, seventh-, and eleventh-grade boys and girls were interviewed on the topic of deviant behavior among their peers. They were also asked to make deviance judgments on 2 story characters whose behaviors exemplified qualities that typically evoke an attribution of psychological disorder on the part of adult judges. 1 story described loss of control and aggression, the other a distorted and paranoid perception of social reality. The pattern of reaction to the stories was consistent with age-related shifts in the basis for deviant status. First graders largely failed to think in terms of group norms. The transition from the middle grades to adolescence was marked by greater emphasis on social consensus—both in psychological perspective and group behavior.

Some social processes are important not because they are frequent occurrences in everyday life but because they serve as a frame of reference for the conduct of daily life. The attribution of psychological disorder is just such a process. Among laymen, such attributions are rarely made in earnest, although they are the basis for much adult humor. To consider another person as psychologically disordered is to raise fundamental questions of that person's status as a human being. Although it is clear that adults do make such judgments, and much is known about the basis upon which such attributions are made by adults, little is known about the origins of such a judgment. Children joke about "craziness" with one another, but it is not usually clear that they employ this term in the same way as adults. The present study is an investigation of the developmental origins of the social judgment that permits some persons to be considered psychologically disordered. As such, the study is part of a growing body of research on the development of social perception and social cognition, a literature largely dominated to this point by work on moral judgment.

According to a major sociological theory of mental illness labeling (Scheff 1966), disorder is attributed to those forms of deviance that do not fit into other existing, definable categories of social deviance, such as immorality or criminality. Disorder is thus a residual category of deviance—to be applied to behaviors not accounted for by other social judgment categories. It therefore follows that the disorder judgment is developmentally derivative from other social judgments. That is, it emerges as a category of judgment only when other categories, such as morality and competency, are well established and when the child encounters events that seem not to fit these existing categories.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the nature of deviant status in the peer group across a wide cross-sectional age span. Of particular interest were changes with age in the type of social comparison involved in the attribution of deviant status. By interviewing children at different ages, we hoped to discover the point at which children become sensitive to that which adults refer to as "irrationality"—the manifestation of behavior that does not fit into rationally conceived categories.

Two inquiry strategies in our cross-sectional survey were utilized. First, children of different ages were asked to describe children whom they considered to be markedly different from most of their peers. Next, subjects were presented with controlled stimuli—brief stories—and asked to make deviance judgments about the story figures and to discuss the basis for their judgments. The stories were constructed to portray characteristics of behavior that, among adult judges, typically evoke attributions of disorder. In our survey of research on the laymen's conception of mental illness (Coie, Costanzo, & Cox 1975; Dohrenwend & Chin-Shong 1967; Star, Note 1; Coie, Costanzo, &

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Cox, Note 2), we found two types of behavior most characteristic of that which exemplifies psychological disorder for adults: One type involves the person with an extremely deviant perception of life events, that is, a person who has delusions or hallucinations. The other type is a person who loses control of himself, usually in a manner that is physically dangerous to others.

We constructed two stories: one was about a child with a seriously distorted social perspective and the other about a child who often lost control of himself. We asked subjects to make deviance judgments about these story figures. We then asked them to explain the basis for their judgments, much the way children in moral judgment studies are interviewed. From these ratings and discussions we then make inferences about our subjects' recognition of the disorder elements contained in the stories.

Methods

Subjects

Ten girls and 10 boys at each of four grade levels (first, fourth, seventh, and eleventh) were interviewed. The mean ages for these groups were approximately 7, 10, 13, and 17 years, respectively. Subjects were interviewed at the end of the school year. Subjects came from schools serving a largely white, middle-class population. Race was not considered as a variable in the design; however, the racial distribution of subjects was comparable across grade level on a 3:1 ratio of whites to blacks.

Procedure

Two female investigators interviewed the female subjects, and two male investigators interviewed the male subjects. Each experimenter interviewed 20 children, five from each of four grade levels, except that one male interviewer was replaced by another male member of the research team for the high school interviews because of scheduling conflicts. Each interview began as follows:

If you think about the kids you know, you'll notice that everyone is not exactly the same, that there are differences between people. There are differences in the way people look. There are also differences in the way people act. Some people do things one way, some another. But sometimes there are kids who act a lot differently from the way most of the others act. Usually we don't think it's polite to talk about people who are different, but this is special. I just want to find out what you notice about kids that act differently. You don't have to tell me their names; I just want to find out about the kinds of things you see. I'd like you to tell me about some kids you know who are different from most other kids.

[The following three questions were asked if the child did not spontaneously provide this information: "You've told me a lot of things that (name) does. Remind me of the things he/she does which most kids would think are different." "Are there other things he/she does that make him/her different?"]

You've told me about this person, and that he/she does _____. You know, sometimes boys and girls have ideas about why someone acts the way they do. I know it might be hard to understand why this person acts the way he does, but I'd like to hear some of your ideas about why he acts that way. [A number of probes were used in the follow-up to amplify the different meanings of this "why" question.]

The presentation of the two stimulus stories in the second section of the interview was preceded by an introduction to the concept of quantitative difference judgments. Subjects were oriented to this concept through the use of a visual aide that consisted of a horizontal row of six boxes, numbered zero through five. The size of the boxes increased in equal increments, ranging from a very small box which indicated that the person in question was "not at all different," to the largest box, which portrayed the idea of "very much different." In order to substantiate the respondent's grasp of the significance of the boxes, each subject was requested to "practice" using the boxes. Subjects were asked to indicate a quantitative judgment of the degree of difference of the behavior(s) which they spontaneously described during the first half of the interview. The subjects were then given the standard stories. Each story was read twice to insure full comprehension. The following directions were given to the subjects prior to the presentation of the stories:

You've been telling me about some boys and girls you know. Now I am going to tell you about some children that I know. None of them is from your school, although you might know someone who acts the way they do.

As I tell you about each boy [female subjects were given stories about girls], I want you to think about how different the way he acts is from the way most children act. Then I want you to show me how different you think these boys are from most kids by using the boxes we just practiced with. I also want you to think about why he acts the way he does. I'll read each story twice to make sure you hear everything.

The stories were as follows (the story character was always of the same sex as the subject):

Loss of Control story: We'll call this boy Bill. He is a boy about your age. He is in the _____ grade, too. Recently, Bill has been getting into fights for no real reason. Sometimes little things set him off, and he will start shouting and screaming at other children. When asked about why he keeps getting into fights, he says he doesn't know why, he just can't stop.

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Distorted Perception story: We'll call this boy Peter. He is a boy about your age. He is in the _____ grade, too. Recently, Peter has been telling his parents and his teachers that the other children are talking about him, and he thinks they are out to get him even though they've never done anything to him. Every day after school, Peter goes home a different way so that no one can follow him.

The standard inquiry after each of the stories consisted of the following questions:

Now I've told you about [name]. Show me how different [name] is from most children, using the boxes. Remember that the size of the box shows me how different you think he is.

What is it that [name] does that makes him different from most kids? O.K. Now I'd like you to tell me some of your ideas about why [name] acts the way he does. What might be some reasons why [name] acts that way?

The preceding format resulted in a 4 × 2 (grade level × sex) factorial design with data for each story analyzed independently.

Data Coding Procedures

The 80 interview protocols were transcribed from tape cassettes, and each of the segments of the interview was given a code number to mask the identity of the subject. The open-ended discussions of peer deviance and the reactions to the two story portions of the interview were all rated separately.

The anonymous protocol segments describing perceptions of peer deviance were independently sorted by two judges into the following seven categories:

Aggression.—Physical aggression against other children; destruction of property; verbal aggression, such as cursing or malicious teasing; temper outbursts having no focused target.

Social Norm Violations.—Silly or age-inappropriate behavior; disruptive acts; showing off; snobbery.

Adult Rule Violations.—Breaking school rules; offensive language; stealing, drinking, or drug use.

Social Withdrawal.—Shyness or pronounced social isolation.

Interest and Appearance.—Having markedly different interests from the peer group or dressing and appearing different from others.

Self-referent Attributions.—Reference to peers whose interests differ only from the interviewee or who have a personal grievance with the interviewer.

Nonscorable.—Interviewee responds with nonsequitur or apparently irrelevant comment.

Rater agreement indices were computed, first, on the ability of raters to agree on those portions of the transcript constituting scorable instances of peer deviance (since subjects sometimes mentioned more than one peer and more than one type of behavior) and, second, on rater agreement on the category assignment of deviant instances that were mutually scorable. Agreement for the first index was 81% and for the second, 86%.

Two raters also scored those segments of the interviews containing subjects' reactions to each of the stories (stories were rated independently). Recall that after assigning a deviance rating to the story figure, subjects were asked to state the basis for their rating and to try to explain the story figure's behavior. In so doing, subjects provided us with their understanding of the incident. From these responses we can see which parts of the story were fully recognized and understood by subjects and which parts were ignored or reconstructed by them. Raters sorted the responses into one of three categories:

Recognition.—Subjects in this category clearly recognized the "disorder" component in each story and accurately reported the stories as they had been portrayed. The basis for attributing deviant status to the story figure was, in the one case, the actor's distortion of reality testing or, in the other instance, his failure to control himself. For the Distorted Perception story, subjects construed the figure's fearful behavior as based on a distorted and inaccurate view of events. For example, some subjects said, "His imagination is running away with him," or "He just thinks other kids are after him, but it's not so." Some subjects called the actor paranoid and explained their use of the term. The actor was often seen as having inappropriately transferred the effects of past experiences into the present situation. For the Loss of Control story, subjects recognized that the actor's behavior was neither fully intended nor fully accounted for by the situation in which it occurred. Subjects frequently mentioned the short temper of the actor and noted the minimal provocations for his acts.

Reconstruction.—Subjects in this category reconstructed the stories in such a manner as to normalize the actor's behavior. In so doing, they omitted key elements of the story and added new elements. For the Distorted Perception story, such subjects perceived the fearfulness of the story figure as a legitimate response to actual threats from peers. The perspective of the actor was seen

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as appropriate to this situation. Often the actor was seen as having provoked the other children's aggressive behavior—by tattling on them to the teacher, for example. Sometimes the actor was seen as a persecuted outcast. The Loss of Control story figure's aggressive behavior was construed as either a natural reaction to peer provocation or a reflection of the actor's essentially aggressive character (he's a bully).

Transition.—This category was used to identify subjects who seemed to be in a genuinely transitional state. These subjects initially recognized the "disorder" components in each story, but as they continued to talk about the story figure and tried to explain his behavior they reverted to attempts at normalizing the actor's behavior in just the ways described above as "reconstructions."

The children's descriptions of deviant peers were also scored by raters for mention of Loss of Control or Distorted Perspective episodes. The same general criteria were employed as those used in scoring the standard inteview protocols.

The percentage of agreement between raters (the ratio of identical ratings to total number of protocols rated) was 83% for both Loss of Control and Distorted Perspective ratings. Two Loss of Control protocols were deemed unscorable because in the raters' estimation it was not possible to decide in which category the protocols belonged. Disagreements between raters were resolved by discussions between raters in which final ratings were determined for these protocols.

A sizable number of rater disagreements were over whether a protocol should be categorized in the *transition* or *recognition* categories, both of which indicate some recognition on the part of the subject. If the rater agreement is computed on whether or not subjects show some recognition (i.e., if disagreements between *transition* and *recognition* are excluded), then the rater agreement becomes 94% and 90% for Loss of Control and Distorted Perspective, respectively.

Results

First consider the data on peer deviance. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the kinds of behaviors that children from each of the four age groups consider to be markedly different from that of most of their peers. The two largest categories of deviance were Aggression and Social Norm Violations. These accounted for over half the nominations. Although there were no significant age group differences for the Aggression category as a whole, 12 of the 16 references to physical aggression against other children came from first and fourth graders.

There was a significant age group difference for the Social Norm Violation category, $\chi^2(3) = 7.87$, $p < .05$. This effect is almost entirely due to infrequent mention of this kind of behavior by first graders. That first graders rarely responded in terms of peer codes and peer norms is also reflected in the fact that two-thirds of the Self-referent Attributions came from first graders. In addition, there were five first graders whose responses were deemed Nonscorable because they seemed not to comprehend the thrust of the questions. These facts suggest that our first-grade subjects do not yet view the behavior of their peers in the framework of group norms or group behavior patterns.

The only age groups to make significant use of the Adult Rule Violations category and the Social Withdrawal category were the fourth- and eleventh-grade subjects, respectively.

Our subjects' accounts of peer deviance were also scrutinized for mention of the two kinds of behavior that characterize psychological disorder

TABLE 1

CATEGORIES OF PERCEIVED DEVIANCE BY GRADE LEVEL

CATEGORY	GRADE 1	4	7	11	TOTAL
Aggression	9	11	9	4	33
Social Norm Violations	3	11	12	11	37
Adult Rule Violations	1	9	2	2	14
Social Withdrawal	0	1	2	10	13
Differences in Interest or Appearance	1	2	4	4	11
Self-referent Attributions	8	1	3	0	12
Nonscorable (irrevelant response)	5	1	1	0	7
Total	27	36	33	31	127

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as it is conceived of by adult judges. We found that children rarely mentioned peers who seemed to lose control of themselves or have a markedly distorted view of social reality. One first grader and three subjects each from the fourth, seventh, and eleventh grades mentioned Loss of Control behavior. Only one seventh and four eleventh graders recounted incidents of Distorted Perspective. The use of terms such as "crazy," "mental problems," "needs to see a psychologist," or "has emotional problems" was restricted to seven eleventh graders and two seventh graders. Thus we found that only among eleventh graders was there significant reference to the language and phenomena of psychological disorder.

To answer the question of how children respond to the phenomena of "disorder," two kinds of data were examined: the deviance ratings of the two story figures and the analysis of children's discussions of these two story figures. The children's discussions of the stories illustrate both their understanding of the stories and the basis of their deviance attributions.

Table 2 shows the distribution of category ratings by grade level for each of the stories. (For the statistical analysis, the categories of *transition* and *recognition* were collapsed to enhance the reliability of the χ^2 analysis, since otherwise 13 of the 24 cells would have frequencies of 5 or less.) Significant age trends were found for both stories: Loss of Control, $\chi^2(3) = 27.36$, $p < .001$; Distorted Perspective, $\chi^2(3) = 30.32$, $p < .001$. The linear patterns of increasing recognition and accommodation were similar for the two stories. (The term "accommodation" is used in the Piagetian sense—to describe the child's having made a cognitive adjustment to something new.)

The results indicate that first-grade subjects invariably normalized the stories by translating them into events and characters they could readily understand. For these children, aggressive behavior was a result of genuine provocation or of aggressive character, and fearfulness was always perceived as a reaction to direct overt threat. In contrast to the younger subjects, the older subjects found the stories puzzling and paradoxical because they recognized the irrational qualities of behavior portrayed in them. They found themselves having to clarify this irrationality rather than denying it and thus wrestled with the problem of explanation. In so doing they became involved in a very different form of social perspective taking and social judgment than the younger subjects. Some subjects (*transition* subjects) recognized the problem of irrationality but reverted to familiar forms of social explanation and thus ignored the problem.

The means for the deviance ratings of the two story figures are displayed in table 3. (The deviance ratings made by first graders were excluded from this analysis since, as we noted earlier, most first graders did not seem to be making normative comparisons when asked to think of children who were different from most peers. We thus concluded that this rating would not represent the same kind of judgment for first graders as for the rest of our subjects.) There was a significant main effect for grade level for the Distorted Perspective story, $F(1,57) = 3.44$, $p < .05$, but not for the Loss of Control story. The linear trend of increasing attributed deviance for the somewhat paranoid character in the Distorted Perspective story is congruent with our previous finding of increasing recognition of the distorted reality testing of this figure. As children come to appreciate the fact that this story figure has a deviant perception of social reality, they assign him (her) an increasingly deviant status. This is particularly clear from some of the adolescent interview protocols.

TABLE 2

RECOGNITION OF LOSS OF CONTROL AND DISTORTED PERSPECTIVE BY GRADE LEVEL

STORY CONDITION	GRADE			
	1	4	7	11
Loss of Control:				
Reconstruction	18	12	8	2
Transition	0	3	4	3
Recognition	1	5	8	13
Distorted Perspective:				
Reconstruction	18	12	12	1
Transition	2	6	4	2
Recognition	0	2	4	17

NOTE.—There were three incomplete protocols for the Loss of Control story; thus there are two fewer eleventh-grade *S*s and one less for the first grade.

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TABLE 3

MEAN DEVIANCE RATINGS FOR STANDARD STORIES FOR GRADE × SEX

STORY CONDITION	GRADE 4	GRADE 7	GRADE 11	GRAND MEAN
Loss of Control:				
Males	3.300	3.100	3.600	3.325
Females	4.100	3.100	2.400	3.675
Grand mean	3.700	3.100	3.000	3.367
Distorted Perspective:				
Males	1.700	2.300	4.300	2.925
Females	2.100	3.500	4.200	2.975
Grand mean	1.900	2.900	4.250	2.950

The pattern of findings is not so straightforward for the Loss of Control story figure. All grade levels rated this figure at a moderately high level of deviance. (Despite the pattern of means, there was not a significant sex × grade level interaction effect for this story.) Possibly this is a consequence of having used a story that combines loss of control with aggression. Although this combination is a particularly salient example of loss of control, it is clear from the data on peer deviance that aggression, by itself, holds somewhat different meaning across the age levels spanned by our sample. The deviance ratings of subjects may represent something quite different at each grade level. Fourth-grade deviance ratings may have been more a response to the aggression component than to the loss of control component of the story, whereas the reverse may have been true for eleventh graders, with seventh graders responding more like the fourth graders than the eleventh graders.

Discussion

Let us first summarize these findings and then attempt to integrate them with other development work on social judgment and social perception. First of all, we found that 7-year-olds had great difficulty making deviance attributions. The difficulty lay in placing the behavior of others in a normative framework. These children understand the terms "same" and "different"; they are also able to single out peers whose behavior they dislike. This latter fact may actually constitute the central impediment to their making a normative comparison. As is often seen in the moral judgments of children this age, the immediate consequences of the other child's behavior are so central to their thinking that they have difficulty decentering from these consequences and considering that behavior in a larger social context. Thus, for instance, they do not consider whether the child in question is aggressive toward many other children also, as is the case for 10- and 13-year-old subjects; they simply focus on the fact that this child has aggressed against them.

Children in the middle school years—fourth graders and many seventh graders—were able to make normative comparisons, but these comparisons dealt primarily with grossly observable behaviors. That is, unlike eleventh graders, there was no explicit focus on deviance as a failure to fit in with the group itself; instead they focused on the violations of concrete behavioral rules and codes.

For 17-year-olds, deviance took on a genuinely social definition. Not only were their judgments normatively based, but the content of deviance attributions was focused on social awareness and social facility. This sensitivity to the way most people think and feel was matched by their ability to come to conceive of nonnormative internal states—disorder and irrationality. We see in this group the emergence of a new form of social judgment (or at least the capability for such a judgment)—the judgment that another person fails to match up to a social criterion for psychological stability. This judgment reflects important changes in social perspective-taking ability. Not only can other persons be considered as having different perspectives from oneself, but other persons can be considered to have a nonnormative perspective, that is, they can be conceived of as perceiving a different set of facts because of their psychological perspective and not merely because of having a different physical perspective.[1]

[1] Whiteman (1967) has also obtained age-related patterns in the recognition of somewhat atypical psychological processes in other persons (i.e., defense mechanism). By specifying antecedent conditions in a manner which highlighted their salience for the actor's subsequent behavior—the behavior to be explained by subjects—Whiteman obtained data reflecting earlier recognition of unusual psychological processes than was found in the present study.

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These findings are quite consistent with those from research on children's moral judgments (e.g., Costanzo, Coie, Grumet, & Farnill 1973; Hebble 1971; Piaget 1932; Shaw & Sulzer 1964). The young child views the actions of others primarily in terms of their overt consequences rather than the intentions that guide these actions. This is particularly true for behaviors with negative consequences. By the middle school years, children are conscious of the distinction between intended and unintended rule violations and, as with our subjects, are aware of the problem of self-control. Later, the adolescents' preoccupation with the social scrutiny of peers (Elkind 1967) is accompanied by a sensitivity to more subtle social conventions rather than the more obvious rules of moral codes and adult authority. Adherence to these more subtle conventions and the resulting sense of social inclusion depend on a shared perception of that which is proper. Thus it is not surprising that the Distorted Perspective story figure was attributed very deviant status by the eleventh-grade subjects. These subjects both understood the distortion involved and were alarmed by it, to a greater extent than the Loss of Control episode.

The norms of adolescents, as is also the case for adults, are usually situation-specific. That is, certain behaviors can be considered appropriate responses to one set of circumstances but not to other circumstances. As a consequence, adolescents are increasingly able to recognize whether or not a particular circumstance has evoked an actor's response or whether the actor's response was determined by factors idiosyncratic to the actor. This distinction, of course, is a fundamental issue in the attribution of psychological disorder.

While we have not directly tested the hypothesis that our eleventh-grade subjects make attributions of disorder in the same way as do adults, we have established that, as a group, they are clearly able to conceptualize the kinds of juxtapositions of behavior and circumstance that typify the notion of disorder for adults. We have also established that somewhere between our two oldest groups (seventh and eleventh grades) an important shift has taken place in the criterion for deviant status—a shift from emphasis on consensus-oriented acts to consensus-oriented thinking. It is just such a shift that would also signify the emergence of a new category of social judgment—the judgment of psychological instability or disorder.

There is an irony to the developmental pattern of attribution that we have described. Much of the current developmental research on social cognition has focused on the progress of the child toward thinking of other persons as stable and predictable—that they possess traits. In this present work we have extended this progression to the point at which other persons can be considered to be characterized by a new trait or characteristic, that is, that they are unstable and unpredictable—in short, psychologically disordered.

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